NOTES ON BOOK BINDING.

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Charles Gerrig.


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French, XVIIth Century.—*Le Gascon.*

Notes on

Book Binding,

... by ...

Charles Gerring,

Author of "Notes on English Book Plates,"
and "Notes on Book Illustration."

37 Illustrations

Frank Murray,
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Nottingham,
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1GEB





"That weight of wood, with leathern coat o'erlaid,
Those ample clasps of solid metal made,
The close press'd leaves unoped for many an age,
The dull red edging of the well-fill'd page,
On the broad back the stubborn ridges roll'd,
Where yet the title stands in tarnish'd gold."



HE subject of Book-binding, is, I am glad to say, congenial to a large number of people, therefore I have been encouraged to collect a few notes and facts relative to this craft. I should like it to be understood at the outset, that this essay does not pretend to be a History of the subject,

far from it; these "Notes" may be taken as my own impressions on a handicraft that has interested me for over twenty-five years, aided by researches on the subject. I can well remember how attractive to me were the various processes from "folding" to "finishing," which were brought under my notice during my earliest connection with my present occupation; there was a primitive "Bindery" at the back of our premises at Oxford, where many pleasant hours were spent when I had leisure. It was my privilege and pleasure also to have dealings with those Masters of the Craft at that time: Hayes, Morley, Salter, and Valters, at classic Oxford; many fine specimens of their good Vellum and other work have I had through my hands.

I have no intention of dealing with ancient Binding, or speculating as to when the art was first invented; we may take it that the "present form of Binding was used about the fourth century of the Christian era." These early bindings were simple, and only intended

for the preservation of the written matter within the covers, but it was soon found that these leather covers lent themselves to decoration. The evolution of this grand art has been interesting and wonderful. It is worthy of note that from the earliest times till now, the "forwarding," *i.e.* stitching, etc., has been much the same; the older style was to stitch the sheets or leaves on to strips of leather or vellum, instead of, as now, stitching the sheets on strings, though a friend of mine informs me that this was not always the case, as he has a very early pair of boards, Xth or XIth century, sewn with string only; and he has seen, in the regulations of a Binders' Guild, a fine for *not* sewing on whit-leather.

In early times, from the Vth to the VIth centuries, and also later, precious stones, ivory, gold, silver, needlework, and enamels were used for decorative purposes on the covers; examples of these are found more on the Continent than in England, though a number are to be seen in the British

Museum; The Bodleian, Oxford; South Kensington Museum; and in other collections. Many of the books of old time were bound by monks, later on secular craftsmen enrolled themselves in Guilds.

Great progress was made in the Art during the reign of Charlemagne, A.D. 800. One specimen of the beautiful work of this time was in the Ashburnham collection, recently dispersed by auction; the covers—$13\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ inches—being composed entirely of gold and jewels; a magnificent specimen of goldsmiths' work.

From the VIIIth to the XIth centuries, the Irish monks made some very beautiful "Book Satchels" for carrying volumes, either suspended by leathern thongs from the girdle, or for hanging on pegs; these satchels were exquisitely decorated. The Celts also were famous for making "Book Shrines," or cases elaborately decorated for protecting bound manuscripts. Some exquisite examples of enamelled bindings may be seen in the British Museum, done from the Xth to the XIVth centuries.

It is gratifying to know that in the XIIth century English Binders took premier place in the Art; Winchester, London, Durham, York, and Oxford produced work of wonderful beauty, finished with impressed stamps. In the XIVth century velvet was used for covering books; this material was frequently decorated with beaten gold, and sometimes precious stones were added; silver also was used for bosses and corners. Velvet, though beautiful as a binding, is not lasting, so we find the art of working in the more durable leather steadily advancing in the XVth century.

The library of Tritheimius, Abbot of Spanheim, at the end of the XVth century, was one of the wonders of that time, and contained about 2,000 manuscripts, many bound by his own monks. Large collections of books were then few, and only in the possession of princes and rich men until some time after the invention of printing. Many large tomes in MS. were bound in wooden boards covered in rough leather, and protected by huge brass bosses and corners, while on the sides were plates of brass, and in some cases were added double clasps.

It is hardly necessary to say that until the XVIIth century wooden boards were mostly used, not the millboard we now have, though Mr. William Blades has asserted that Caxton used waste leaves to make boards for his books.

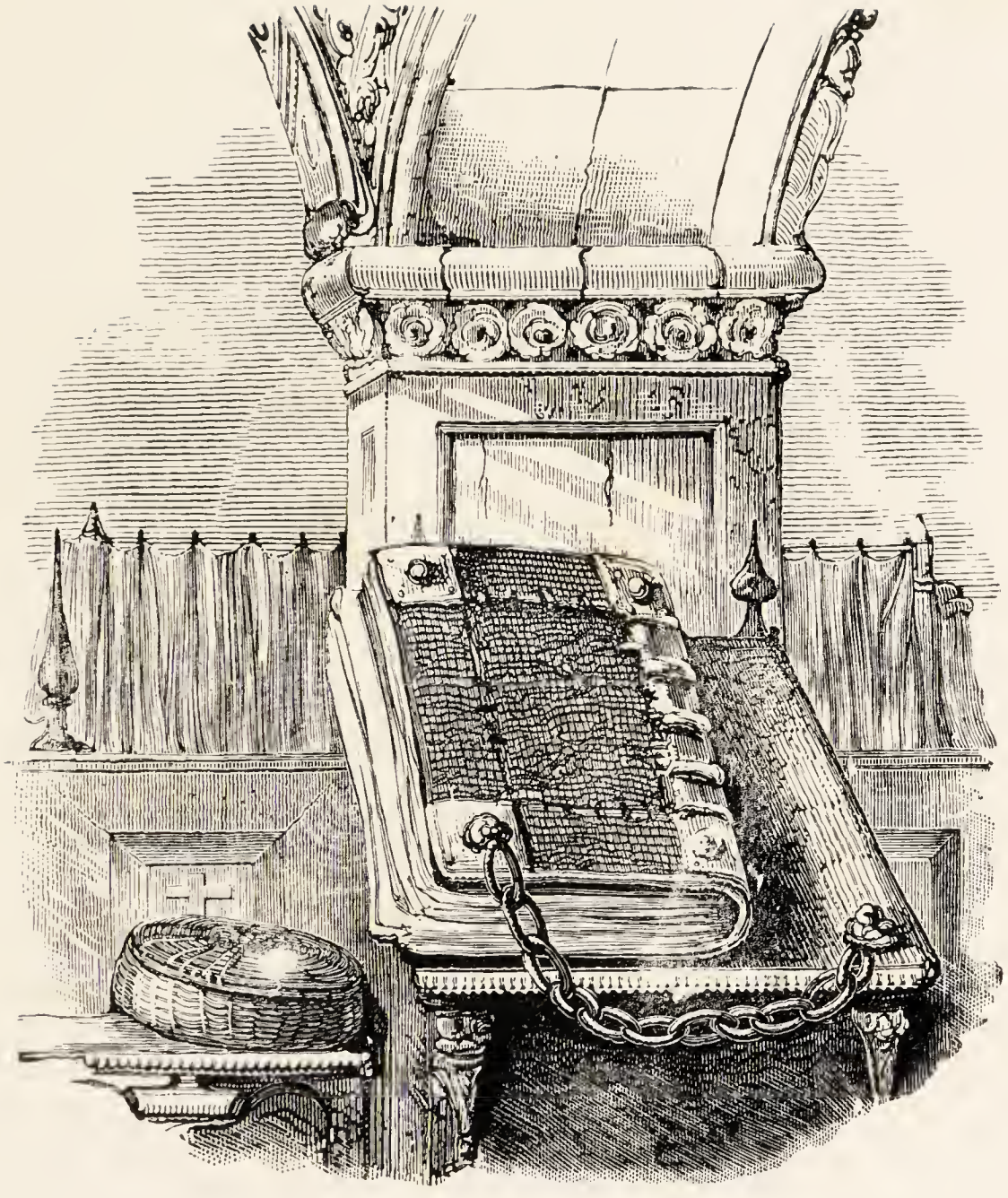
The Germans excelled in ornamental leather work during the XIVth and XVth centuries, rivalling goldsmiths' work in richness. Nuremberg was especially celebrated for wrought leather bindings; the designs were cut in the flat surface of the leather, the background being slightly sunk and covered with minute punchings, so that the design appeared in relief. This "Cuir Ciselé" is, however, an exceptional style of work; the great majority were stamped bindings in calf or pigskin. Koberger of Nuremberg did many fine examples. Spanish and Italian bindings of the same period were very good, and of great artistic merit; Siena workmen seem to have been particularly famous. French bindings of this period were also remarkable; velvet, silk, embroidery and leather being used, enriched with ornaments of metal.

Naturally, the invention of Printing gave a fillip to the craft of Bookbinding, and it is evident that early binders gave extreme care to their work, or we should not have so many priceless volumes in the excellent condition in which they are now found. Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, who died A.D. 1490, was one of the great patrons of books and bindings of that period, and it is said that his library consisted of 50,000 manuscripts and books, preserved in costly and beautiful bindings. Unfortunately this great collection was destroyed by the Turks in 1526, comparatively few volumes being saved. Among the great patrons of books and binding in Italy, mention must be made of the Medici family; although, it is claimed for Phillip, Duke of Burgundy that he eclipsed all other patrons of literature, our King Henry VI., the Duke of Bedford, and Humfray, Duke of Gloucester, were likewise great book collectors; and it is largely due to these patrons that improvements in binding were introduced. Cardinal Mazarin was a well-known patron of delicate and choice work.

The horrible devastation and frightful havoc committed during the "Reformation" has lost to us hundreds of priceless treasures in books and bindings. Bigotry has much to answer for; truly the "Reformation" was not an unmixed blessing! The whole of a great library at Oxford, founded by Duke Humfray of Gloucester, was entirely destroyed in 1550 because some tomes were "Popish!" Mistaken zeal accounts for so many valuable manuscripts being cut up and used as "end-papers" to books bound in the XVIIth century. This is too painful a period to say more about.

In mediæval times it was common to have books chained to reading desks, etc. We have not far to go for an illustration of this, as some good old books, finely bound, are to be seen chained to a very large table in Melton Mowbray Church, some excellent specimens may also be seen in Grantham Church.

The earliest name of note as an English binder is Nicholas, of St. Paul's Gate, 1305;



Chained Bible in Cumnor Church, Oxon.
From W. Andrews' "Curiosities of the Church."

and a little later, the earliest "lady binder" is found in Dionisia, of Flete Strete, in 1311. Stephen Vant, Piers Baudwyn, and Roger Dunse were early London binders. A friend informs me that I should add the names of Herman, Bishop of Salisbury, 1080; and Henry, a monk of Hyde Abbey, Winchester, 1178. Celebrated among German binders, 15th century, were John Reichenbach, Johannes Fogel, Antony Koberger, Veldener, and Nicholaus Ghaunt. Caxton appears to have brought some bookbinders with him from Bruges, circa 1476; but only a few Caxton-printed books are found in their original stamped brown-leather bindings, with four bands; most specimens of his work having been re-bound. In 1491, Wynkyn de Worde succeeded to Caxton's business, and appears to have added largely to his binding tools. Mr. Gordon Duff says "Wynkyn de Worde's bindings were probably executed by Netherlandish binders working in England."

Jean Grolier, born 1497, died 1565, Treasurer to Francis I, King of France, was a

most enthusiastic amateur, and patron of binding; large numbers of books were specially bound for him in Venice and France, many of the most exquisite design and workmanship, though not all of equal merit; the style he adopted was so pronounced and beautiful that Grolieresque imitations have been frequently used. On the covers of nearly all his books were impressed the generous words:—"*J. Grolerii et Amicorum.*"

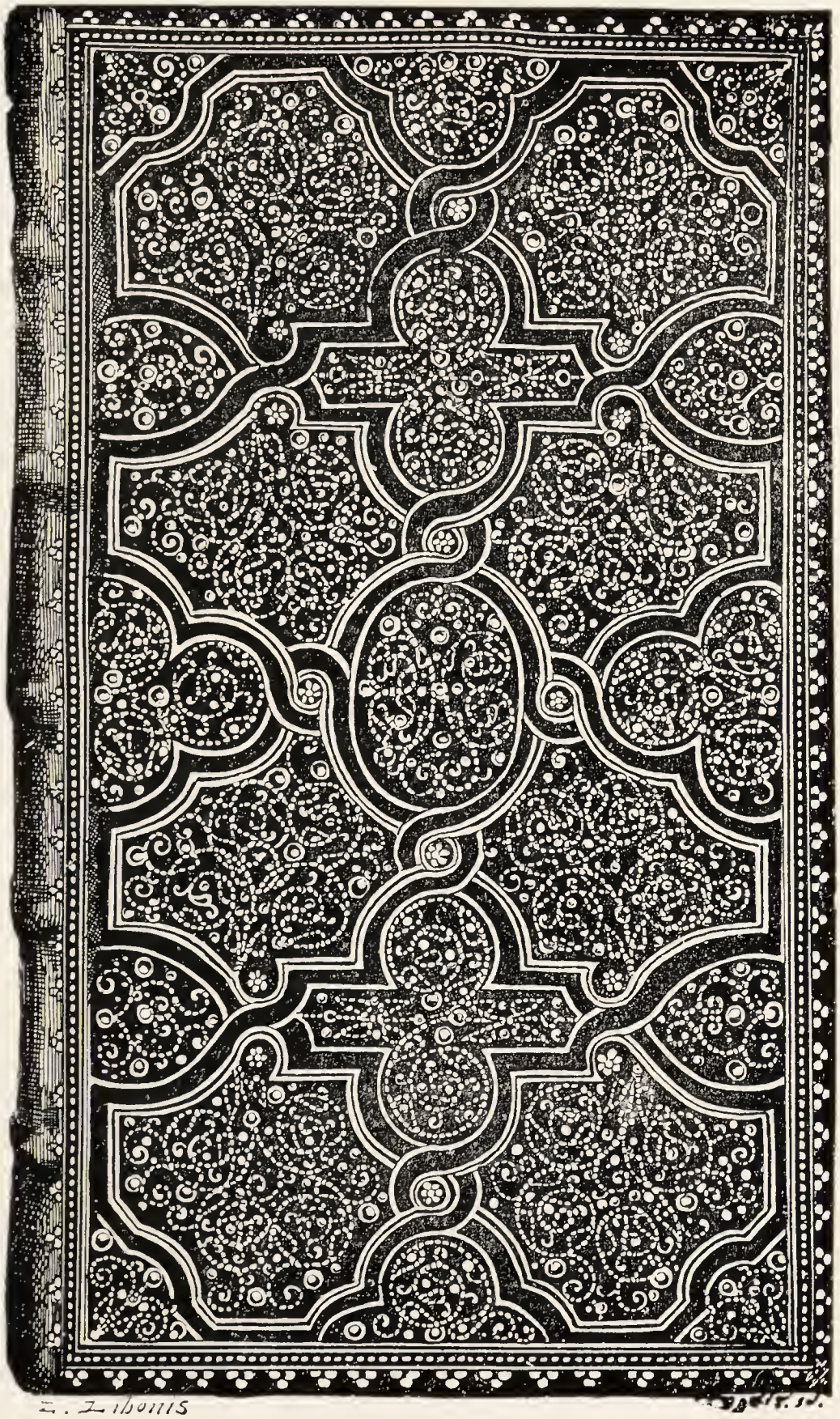
Queen Elizabeth possessed some magnificent specimens of embroidered bindings, some of which were wrought by her own hands; her "Golden Manual of Prayers" was covered with gold, enamelled by George Heriot, the celebrated Scottish goldsmith, and in 1893 this treasure was sold by auction for 1220 guineas. Queen Mary I. favoured velvet bindings with silver mountings. My subject is so enticing that I should like to give many more historical notes, but I cannot be satisfied without mentioning a few famous names with approximate dates, such as Nicolas & Clovis Eve, 1570-1620; Le Gascon,



French, XVIIth century.—*Le Gascon.*



French, XVIth century.—*La Fanfare.*



French, XVIIth century.—*Le Gascon.*



Italian, XVIIth century.

1662; Boyet, 1670; Kalthober, 1720; Du Seuil, 1730; J. A. Derome, 1740; A. Padeloup, 1750; De Lorme, 1750; Le Monnier, 1744; Douceur, Anguerraud, Dubuisson, and others. All of these were great artists, and had distinct styles of their own. Of our own countrymen, I must mention of the older binders, Thomas Berthelet, 1530; John Reynes, binder to Henry VIII.; Samuel Mearnes, 1660; and of the later, Eliot & Chapman, binders to Harley, Earl of Oxford; Roger Payne, 1770, one of the finest craftsmen that ever worked, though dissolute in his habits; Clarke, celebrated for tree-calf; Charles Lewis, 1820; C. Hering, Francis Bedford, 1840, &c.

I think the foregoing slight historical sketch sufficient for my present purpose, so I will now give the ordinary technical terms of the principal processes which a book has to go through in being bound, taken seriatim; most of these terms explain themselves:—folding, pressing, beating or rolling, collating, marking-up and sewing, adjusting end-papers, rounding the

back, backing, lacing, cutting, decorating the edges, head-banding, lining-up, covering, finishing, pasting-down. As I am anxious not to make this essay dry, or too technical, I will at once come to the final stage, "finishing," for a visit to any good binding works will illustrate very much better than I can the various processes above mentioned. Though all the "forwarding" processes are essential, "finishing," or decorating the leather covers, is the most generally interesting; this may be done in several ways, such as "tooling," "stamping," "painting," "inlaying," "cut work," or some combination of these methods. Covers may also be decorated with embroidery, needlework of various descriptions, metal work, etc.

A tooled binding has each separate fragment of the design impressed by hand from small tools. A stamped, or blocked binding has the design impressed by machinery from a brass block, often of considerable size. Hand tools are usually mounted in wooden handles similar to chisels. Border patterns are

often engraved on wheels, and many beautiful designs for continuous work are engraved on "rolls," and repeat at every revolution of such roll. Lettering is done by using each letter as wanted, separately. Supplementary necessaries are polishing irons, sponges, glaire, vinegar, gold-leaf, a gold cushion, cotton wool, a gold rag for removing the surplus gold, india rubber for cleaning off what is left by the gold rag, and a finishing stove. Tools are impressed after being heated to the temperature required.

It was my good fortune some time since to be shown over the binding works of Messrs. Birdsall & Son, of Northampton, Mr. Richard Birdsall himself kindly pioneered me through his great establishment, where some 250 people are employed. We began at the beginning, "folding," and we went steadily from one process to another, and he pointed out many fine machines recently added to the plant to save a certain amount of hand labour, viz.: immense rolling machines, cutting machines, that could be adjusted to the utmost nicety,

and many others which turned out their work absolutely perfectly and correctly; but it was the "finishing department" that attracted me most, and I will again state that it is necessary to see for one's self the various stages to appreciate the work, and I recommend any who may get the opportunity at any time, to see through a good factory or workshop: it is an education. After seeing the various departments at work, I was shown the offices and show rooms, where, in glass cases, were some of the most beautiful works of modern art that it has been my privilege to see. I was also shown many letters of approval; amongst others, one from Mr. Holmes, the Queen's private librarian, expressing satisfaction with work done for Her Majesty's private use. I also saw others from many of the nobility, and book lovers, for whom work had been done by this celebrated firm; and I have little hesitation in stating that, given a convenient occasion with proper credentials, those really interested in this art would be most courteously received, and shown much of what I have



Pale Blue Vellum, richly hand tooled, design in tints and gold.—*Birdsall.*

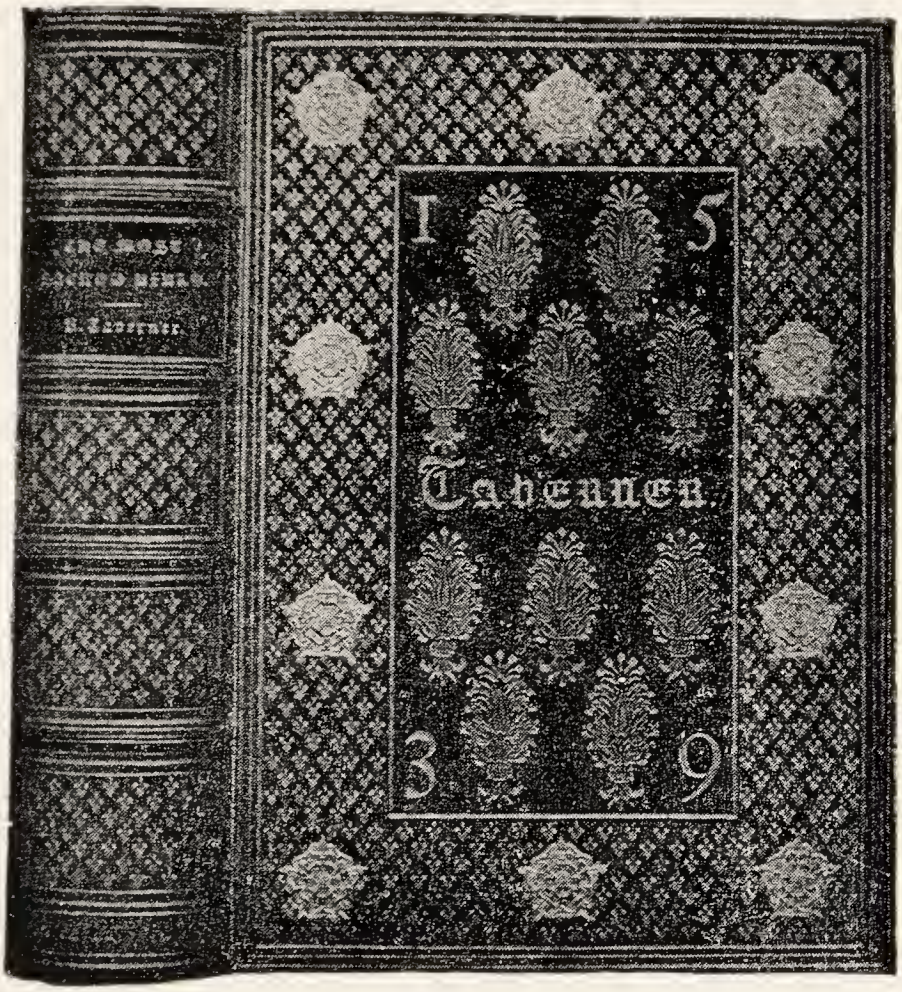
Note the Artist's Palette and Cypher introduced.



Finest Pressed Morocco.– *Birdsall.*



XVIth century contemporary Strap Work Design.
Pressed Morocco.— *Birdsall.*



Pressed Citron Morocco Binding.
Roses in gilt Cameo.—*Birdsall.*



Brown Pressed Morocco.—*Birdsall.*



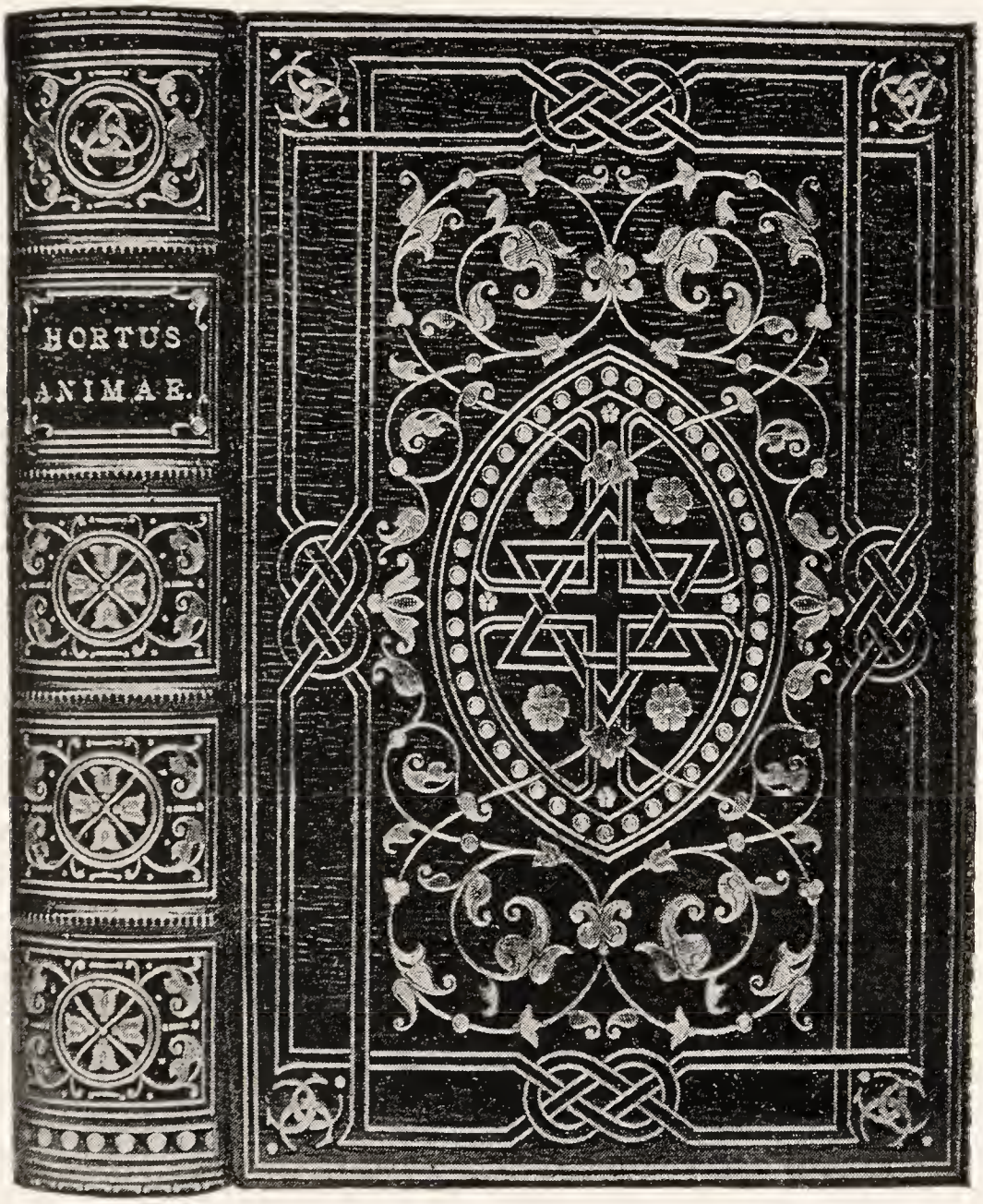
Morocco Doublure to a pressed Morocco Binding.—*Birdsall.*



Folio, in Pressed Morocco.
Inlaid Mediæval Design. *Birdsall.*



Buff Vellum, richly hand tooled, design in tints and gold.—*Birdsall.*



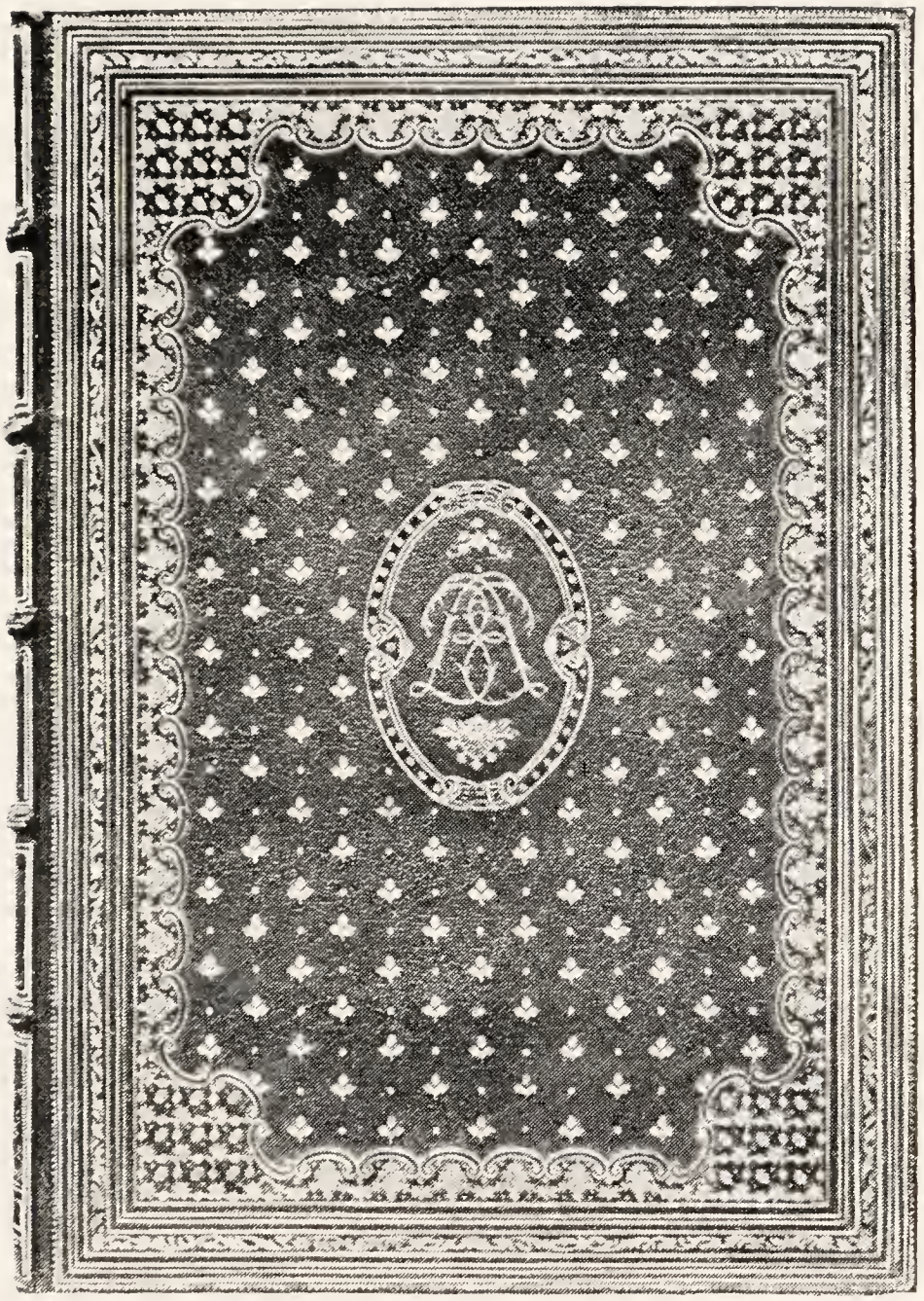
Italian Design, in hand tooled Morocco.—*Birdsall.*



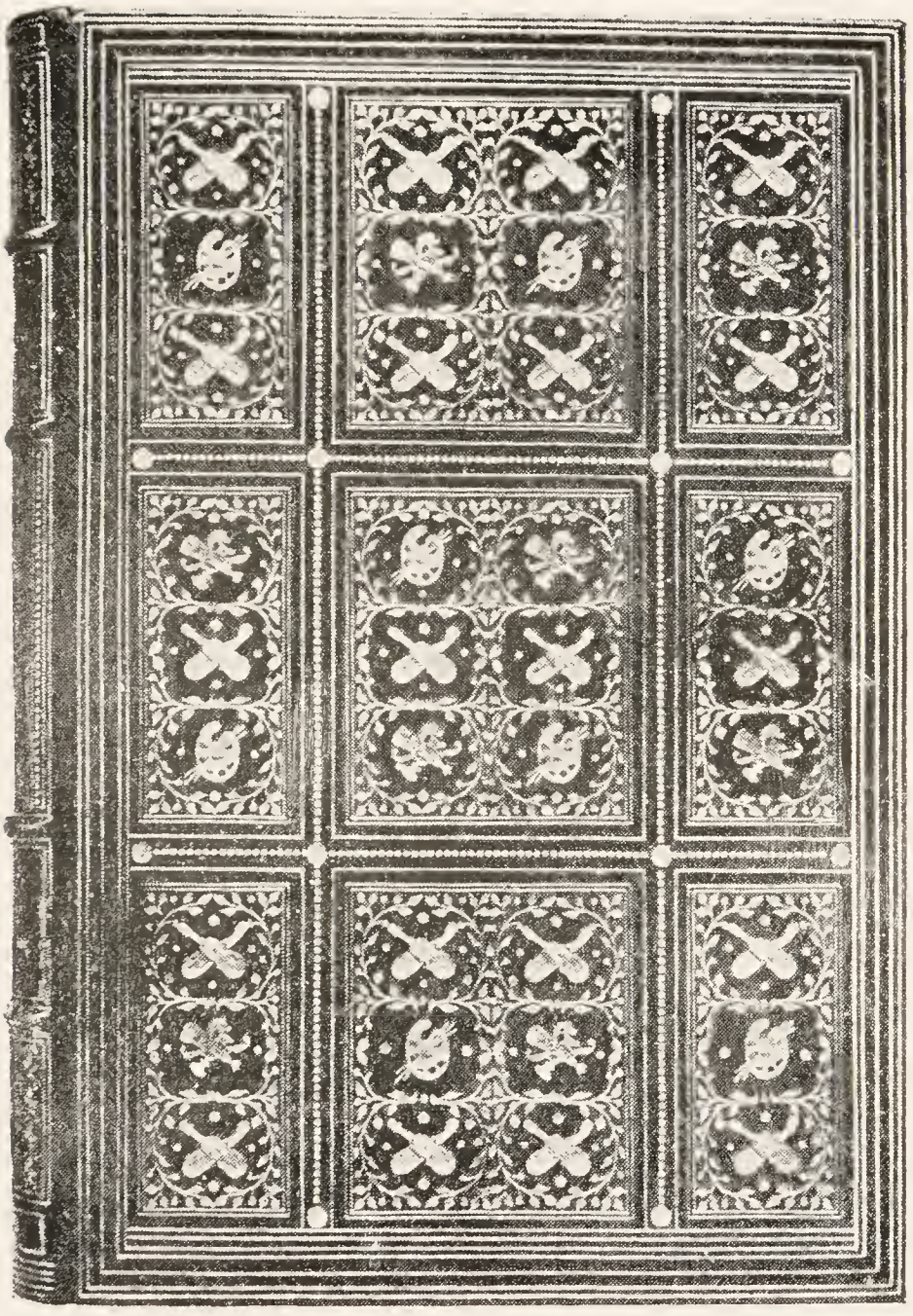
Hand Tooled Morocco Binding.
Style of Le Gascon XVII century.—*Birdsall.*



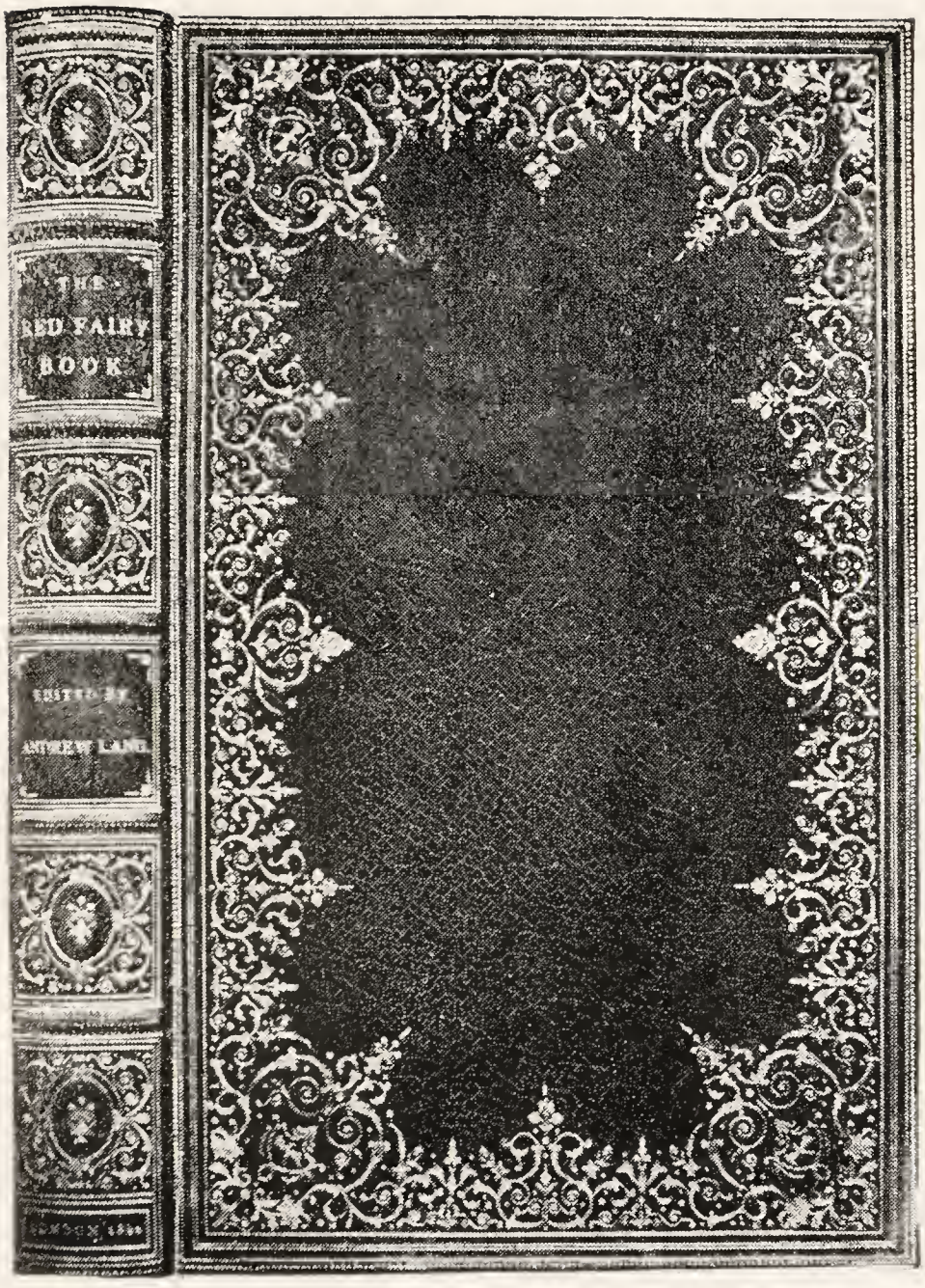
Mediæval Design, in gold, black and grey,
on White Vellum.—*Birdsall.*



Pressed Morocco Binding.
French, late XVIIIth century.—*Birdsall.*



Smooth Crimson Morocco Binding.
Italian, XVIth century.—*Birdsall.*



Red Pressed Levant Morocco.
French, XVIIIth century.—*Birdsall.*



Olive Pressed Morocco.
Italian, XVIth century.—*Birdsall.*



White Vellum, richly hand tooled, design in tints and gold.—*Birdsall.*



Inlaid Crimson Morocco Binding.

English Mediæval XVth century.—*Birdsall.*

attempted to describe. This firm is well-known as the patentees of serviceable ordinary bindings, known as "Stronghold," for magazines, serials, etc.; also of "Bibliofortis" binding, perhaps the strongest work, though plain, that can be done, suitable for public libraries, institutions, etc; these are quoted at very reasonable prices, and many thousands are turned out every year.

Mr. Cedric Chivers, of Bath and London, is a well-known expert; his "Duro-Flexile" library binding being famous, and many of his Reliures are works of art and good taste. I wish more particularly to refer to his recently-perfected "Vellucent" binding. This material is transparent vellum, and lends itself to decorative work excellently, as a book cover may be painted or beautified in anyway, and then covered with Vellucent, which forms a protection to the work underneath. Speaking of Mr. Chivers, Mr. Salt Brassington in his History of Bookbinding, says: "his latest achievements in hand-wrought and gold-tooled leather, place him on

a level with the best binders of the 16th century. There is a lightness and brightness about his work, which, when combined with originality of design and consistency of treatment, produce a result both harmonious and chaste." In a few words I may say that Mr. Chivers aims at two classes of Binding only: Firstly, public and private library bindings, where books have hard usage; and Secondly, he tries to clothe treasured volumes beautifully, not confining himself to the hackneyed methods of the last 300 years.

I will not pretend to give a list of all the skilled binders of the present day, but I cannot refrain from mentioning such well-known masters of their craft, as Messrs. J. Zaehnsdorf, "the chief London binder of the present time," says Mr. Salt Brassington; Tout & Son; Riviere & Son; Ramage; De Coverley; Morrell; Royal School of Art Needlework, Kensington; and Fazakerley, Liverpool.

There have been some very successful amateur binders, to wit, the Hon. Roger



Vellucent Binding, with Original Design in colours and gold.—*Chivers.*



Repoussé Leather Work.—*Chivers.*

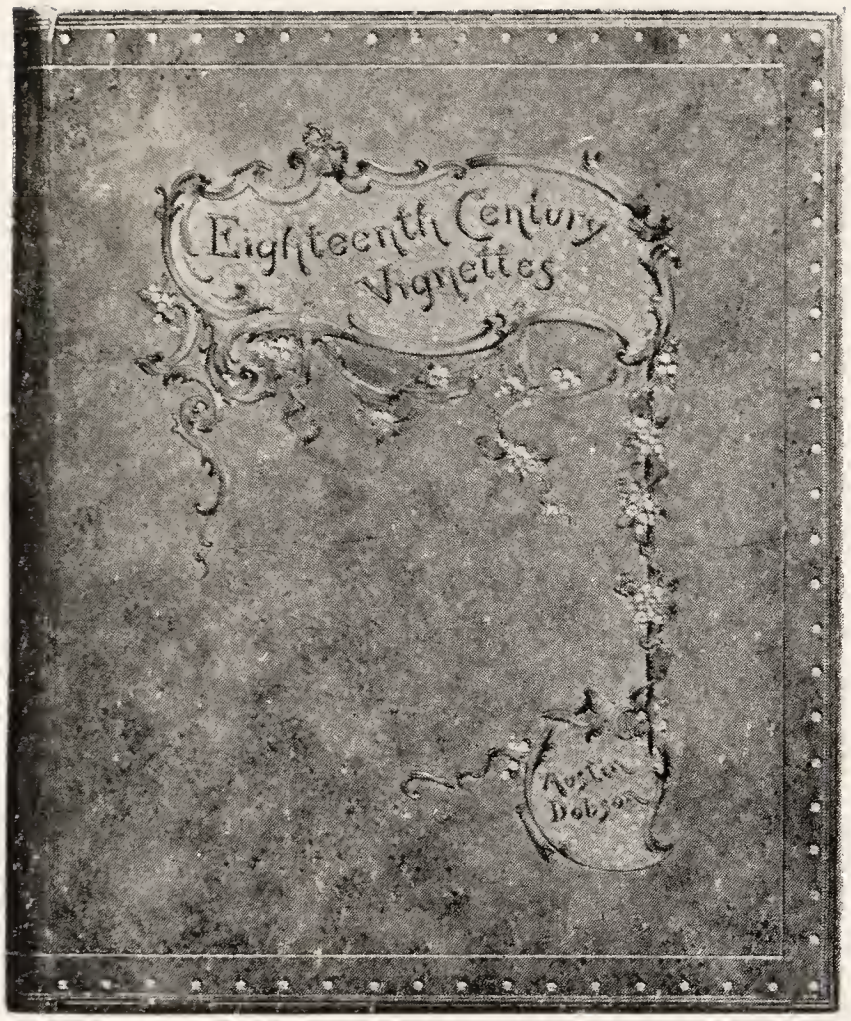


Vellucent Binding, Original Design in colours and gold.—*Chivers.*



Original Design by L. Fairfax Muckley.

Chivers.



Mottled Calf with Repoussé Worked Design.—*Chivers.*



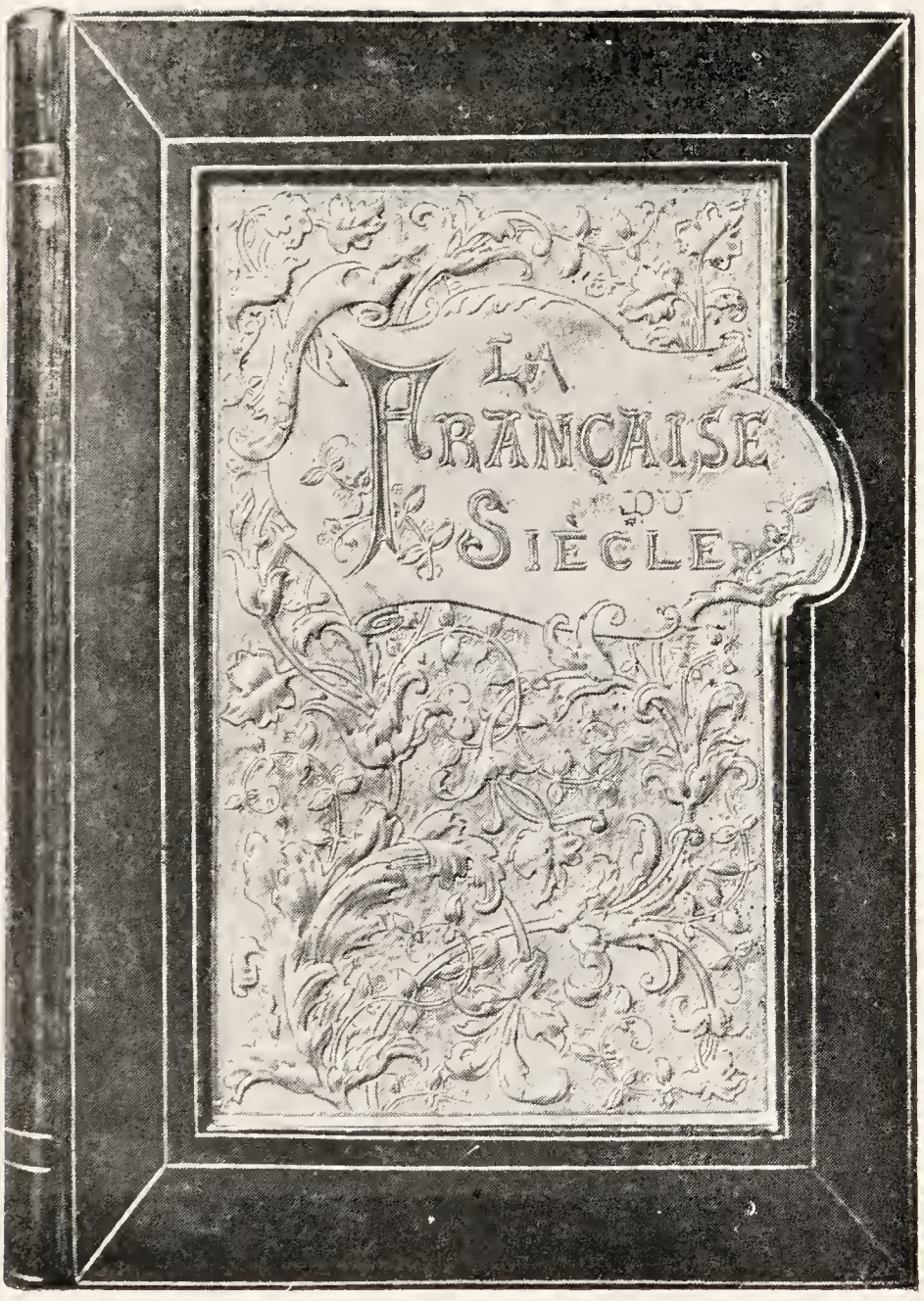
Original Pen and Ink Drawing by the author (Pennell).
In Repoussé Binding.—*Chivers.*



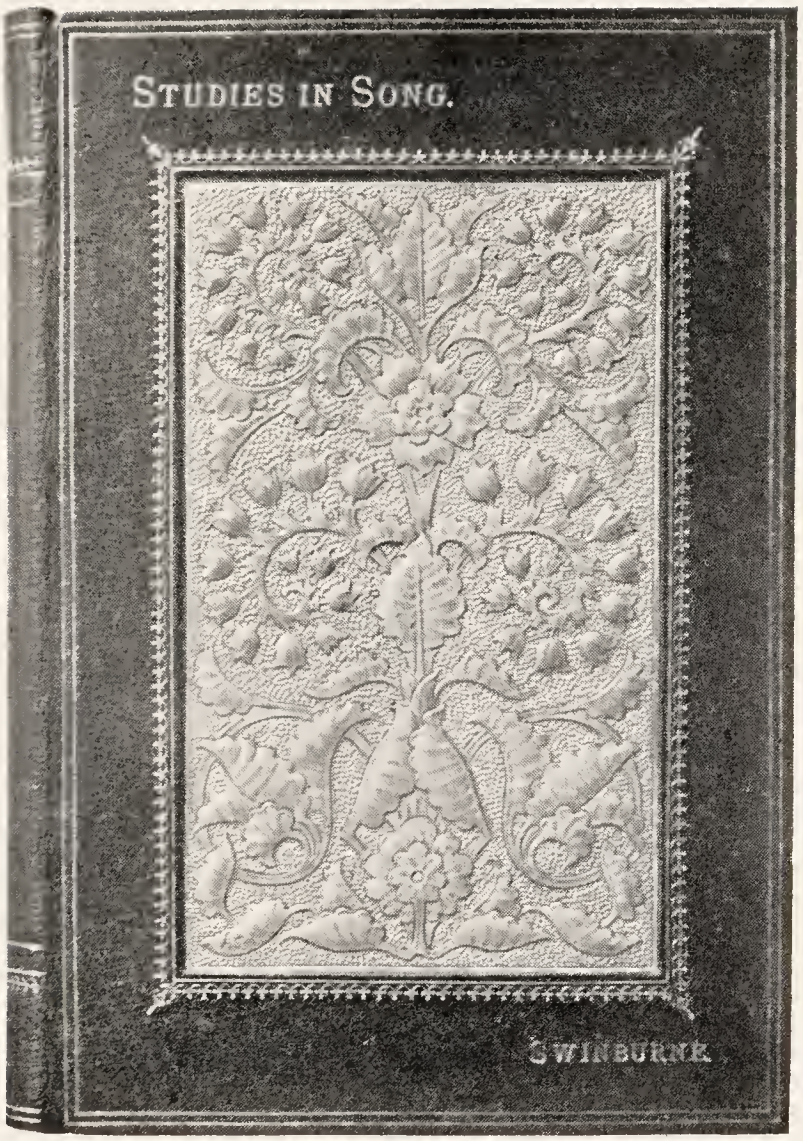
Repoussé Leather Work, with background of gold powdering.—*Chivers.*



Repoussé Work in Leather, coloured and gilt.—*Chivers.*



Original Design in Repoussé Leather.—*Chivers.*



Repoussé Decoration, coloured and gilt.—*Chivers.*

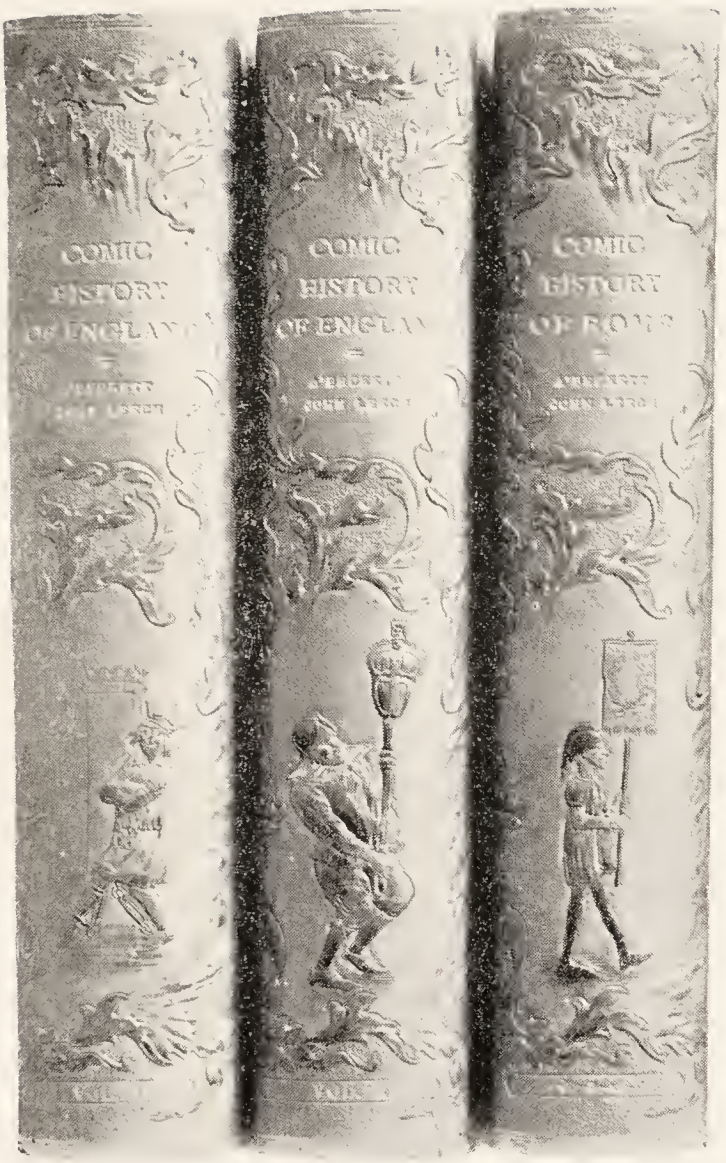


Original Design by H. Granville Fell.

Chivers.



Panel with Repoussé Design.—*Chivers.*



Designs worked in Repoussé Leather.—*Chivers.*



Selected Designs by Mr. Raffles Davidson.

Chivers.

North; Mr. W. Hutton, of Birmingham; Michael Faraday; and, at present, Mr. T. J. Cobden Sanderson, who may be looked upon as one of thc finest binders of the day.

About the year 1830, velvet and silk bindings were re-introduced for drawing-room table books. Doubtless most people well remember the numerous art annuals, forget-me-nots, and drawing-room scrap books that were daintily bound in red and green silks; these have long gone out of fashion again. Some eccentric individuals have had a few books bound in human skin; this idea is really gruesome. Flammarion, the French astronomer, is the possessor of a human reliure, a copy of his "Ciel et Terre" being covered in some of the skin of a French countess. The *Pall Mall Gazette* says that in Marlborough House library is a book bound from the skin of a Yorkshire witch, Mary Patman. André Leroy, Alfred de Musset and others are possessors of bindings in this strange material.

When living in Oxford some years ago, I paid many visits to the Bodleian library; the

late librarian, Dr. Coxe, kindly allowing me to spend numbers of hours examining some of the great treasures to be found there. It is impossible to forget the impressions made on one's mind by the extraordinary beauty of those old bindings. I had the opportunity also of seeing other magnificent specimens in some of the College libraries. It has been my good fortune to see many collections of fine bindings and valuable books, amongst others the Blenheim Palace library, before a portion of that splendid collection was dispersed by auction. There are some choice examples to be seen near Nottingham, at Welbeck and Clumber.

The leather to be most recommended for binding books of value is morocco. Where numbers of books have to be dealt with, half morocco with gilt tops, in my opinion, cannot be excelled. Half levant morocco polished is an ideal binding. Books bound in half bright grained and half levant polished morocco have the advantage that the hardened surface—particularly when varnished—

resists the action of sulphurous acid in a town atmosphere better than any other kind of leather. Vellum is also to be recommended for certain kinds of books; it really is the most durable material by far, and can now be had in various tints. It is not, however, suitable for all books, and lacks the flexibility of morocco. Beware of having the backs of books lavishly gilt; a good leather requires little ornament. Some books deserve binding in full morocco; where you can trust the good taste of a binder leave the matter of "finish" to him; his experience will tell him what is most appropriate, though every owner of a library should have a very good idea of how he wants a book bound, both as regards colour and material.

I have heard many people say that we cannot bind books now-a-days as our forefathers did! I immediately reply, "the very finest work can be done now, and equal to any old binding, if people will pay for it," and I further state that English binders can produce work equal to that done anywhere else,

whether on the Continent or in the United States of America. In old times, patrons gave broad instructions, and did not stint money, and if people now want the results of the highest skill in the craft, they must do the same or they certainly will not get it.

It is not necessary to do more than mention here that there are serviceable cheap bindings for ordinary books; the familiar half Calf, good, bad, and indifferent; half Roan; half Persian; half German Calf; Roxburghe style; Cloth; and Buckram. It has been my object throughout this essay to treat of the highest and best, therefore this reference is sufficient.

I have very great pleasure in acknowledging my indebtedness for the loan of blocks, etc., for illustrating this little brochure, to Messrs. Birdsall & Son, Northampton; and Mr. Cedric Chivers, Bath; Mr. W. Andrews, Hull, Chained Bible, from his "Curiosities of the Church"; Mr. G. Harry Wallis, Nottingham Castle Art Museum; Mr. Bernard Quaritch, Piccadilly, London; and I should be ungrateful if I did not state that I have received most

valuable suggestions from Mr. R. Birdsall. I have consulted, with great advantage, the following, among other books on my subject: Mr. Salt Brassington's "History of Bookbinding," Mr. H. P. Horne's "The Binding of Books," Mr. W. Y. Fletcher's "Bookbindings in the British Museum," and also his valuable work on "French Bookbindings."

I sincerely hope that the foregoing "Notes," which have afforded me immense pleasure in collecting, may prove of some service to any who may read them, as I have found by long experience that many unfortunate errors of judgment are made unwittingly, and many valuable books are clothed in unsuitable covers, for want of suggestion.





